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Postmodernist Study of the Internet

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# A Postmodernist Study of the Internet

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## Abstract

***The point of departure is that the activities associated with the Internet are organizational and societal activities taking place within a given historical context. As such they can profit from sociological theories such as postmodernism. Postmodernism can be seen as a reaction to some signal failures of modernism and the modernity project. It is very much a socio-cultural and philosophical system of thoughts which sprouts in a post-industrial society. The relevant elements of postmodernism used here are: (a) power is diffuse, (b) there is no grand theory to make sense of reality, c) the world is fragmented and chaotic, (d) information technology has an ambivalent character. It is argued that postmodernism offers a fruitful way of understanding and explaining the range of possibilities and challenges that accompany the advent of the Internet.***

**Key words:** The Internet, Modernism, Postmodernism, Sociology of computing

## INTRODUCTION

The point of departure of this paper is that the activities associated with the Internet are organizational and societal activities taking place within a given historical context. As such they can profit from sociological theories that have proved useful in understanding organizational and societal phenomena. One such theory is postmodernism which has been used by sociologists, organizational scholars and other social scientists to help them study contemporary organizations and society. The aim of the paper is to use some aspects of postmodernist thinking to examine the social and cultural consciousness and activities related to the Internet.

In discussing the activities carried out on the Internet, the culture of simulation, the reality of anarchy and chaos, the paradox of oxymorons (global village, virtual reality, etc) figure prominently. These phenomena and experiences can be understood as part of a larger social-cultural context. That context is one that celebrates the experimental, enjoys mixing the playful with the serious, rethinks the conventional wisdom, questions established truths and displays a cynical attitude towards seats of authority. This is a very brief outline of what has come to be known as postmodernism. Postmodernism may also be seen as a critique, and often a total rejection, of ideas, principles and positions held by modernism, such as the notion of progress in history, grand theory to explain social

changes, rationality and reasons. It seeks out incongruity; it is marked by an abiding scepticism, and the scepticism rejects the mainstream tenets of modernism. It is not a movement at all, but a loose collection of tendencies which reflect a new sensibility. It opposes totalizing discourse and is for local determination of meaning.

The paper gives a brief account of modernism and postmodernism in the next section. This is followed by a discussion of the rich and challenging activities related to the Internet from a postmodernist perspective.

## **MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM**

To talk about postmodernism, one can begin with modernity and modernism. Modernity refers to a set of social conditions associated with the advent of the Industrial Revolution, Renaissance and Enlightenment, industrialization and urbanization, science and technology, political and ethical individualism, social contract theory and so forth. Modernism may be seen as the superstructure based on modernity. As such it can be seen as intellectual child of enlightenment which emerged in the struggle against absolutism, corrupt religious orders, superstitions, and their accompanying institutions. Knowledge is perceived as the cure for such social ills. Modernism takes their inspiration from the idea that history has a direction - it is heading somewhere, to a rational order, to progress. Such assumption is present in the theories of social evolution, may it be Parsonian or Marxist. Major historical events such as the two world wars, the rise of fascism and nazism, the fiasco of the socialist states, and phenomena such as the run-away development of technology and the ecological degradation, the huge expenditure on the arms industry in the face of famine, disease and poverty have undermined the confidence of grand modernist projects (Giddens 1994).

Postmodernist thinking reflects both a sense of imposing crisis and a feeling that the modernist system of ideas no longer suffices. The sacrosanct notion of the privileged role of enlightenment, rationality and reason has lost credibility. Postmodernism was first used to document new sensibilities obtaining in the world of architecture and arts. In architecture, it emerges as a critique of architectural modernism, a rejection of the modernist traditions associated with names such as Walter Gropius and Henri Le Corbusier. Postmodernist architecture displaces the modernist principle of abstraction, geometric purity and simplicity by multivocality and pluralism, by renewed interest in the buildings as signs and signifiers and in their referential potential and resources (Magnus 1995). In its critique of institutionalised modernism associated with the International Style of architecture, it prefers hybrid to pure elements, messy vitality and richness to clarity of meaning. It purposely constructs dysfunctional buildings that aim to realize autonomous architecture, free from all modern socio-cultural values. In its disdain of international uniformity, it opts for the particular and the localised. Now the postmodernist discourse has spilled into the fields of sociology, literature, geography, history, economics, politics, organizational studies and perhaps most significant of all, philosophy. In a more radical mood, postmodernism does not adhere to the epistemology of depth that is the canon of traditional representation. The manifest does not refer to the

latent; existence does not refer back to the essence; signifier does not refer back to the signified. The only objects that could represent this world of surface would precisely those that do not allow traditional representation. In other words, postmodernism could only be represented by objects that challenge representation itself (Turkle 1995). Some thinkers who are often associated with postmodernist consciousness are Jean-Francois Lyotard, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, Richard Rorty, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.

Postmodernity suggest that the notions associated with modernity have proved to be untenable. There are no longer any grand narratives (or overall conception of history) which make sense (Lyotard 1984). Not only is there no general notion of progress that can be defended, there is no such thing as history. All that exists is an indefinite number of different histories and forms of knowledge, without any natural centre. This situation is bound up with the declining authority of science and with the recognition that many different, equally authentic values and orientations are possible. The postmodern world is thus a highly pluralistic one. Perhaps to complicate the picture, boundaries which are distinct in modernity are getting fuzzy in postmodernity. The hitherto solid wall between working life and private life is crumbling down. So is the wall dividing consumption from investment (Drucker 1990), between high culture and mass or commercialised culture (Jameson 1984). We are witnessing a landscape of the eroding boundaries between the real and the virtual, the animate and the inanimate, the objective and the subjective. Photographs are supposed to give a faithful pictorial reproduction of the reality "out there". However, in the case of staged photographs, they tell more about the perceptions of the photographer than the photographed. The most recent symbol of this pattern is the cloned lamb Dolly, which erases yet another separation between the natural and the artificial.

For Bauman (1991) and Vattimo (1992), the term postmodern refers to a society of generalized communication, carried through the mass media. The mass media, and (we must add here) the Internet, expose us to a vast variety of images, cultures and opinions. They produce a sort of chaos, as everything becomes visible or transparent. This chaos provides us with ambiguity of meanings and with it the indeterminacy of the future. Postman (1992) observes that "The world we live in is very nearly incomprehensible to most of us. There is almost no fact, whether actual or imagined, that will surprise us for very long, since we have no comprehensive and consistent picture of the world that would make the fact appear as an unacceptable contradiction. We believe, because there is no reason not to believe."

### **Postmodernism itself is ill-defined**

As mentioned above, postmodernism emerges as a reaction to some signal failures of modernism and modernity. In its critical account of modernity, it can be read as *anti-modernism*. Among other things, it attacks the cult of knowledge and warns against the danger associated with elevating rationality and logical reasoning to a kind of hegemonic approach to investigate facts and truths. A form of this is scientism which promotes the scientific method of physical sciences as the method for conducting research in social

sciences. However, postmodernism shares with modernism the desire to advance the cause of human progress, and with the early Enlightenment thinkers and “broad” modernists the respect for dissents and pluralism and the struggle for the under-privileged. In so doing, it is reviving the ethos of the Enlightenment. Here postmodernism is not different from modernism; in fact it is not replacing modernism, it is a *continuation of modernism*.<sup>1</sup> Yet it is different from modernism, e.g. it does not reserve a privileged position for the so-called scientific thinking. Like the *early* modernists, it is going back to pre-modernism for ideas and inspirations. It listens to the voices of intuition; it does not simply ignore interesting ideas which cannot be proved by logical reasonings; it emphasises the spiritual dimension of life., etc. One can thus speak of certain elements of *pre-modernism*.<sup>2</sup> In short, postmodernism is at once anti-modernism, part-modernism and pre-modernism. There is admittedly a kind of self-referentiality to be a postmodernist to see postmodernism in this way. In the present formative stage, postmodernism exhibits diverse, and sometimes conflicting, intellectual tendencies which cannot be contained in a coherent system of thinking. This is pretty similar to the characteristics of modernism in its early days. A description of the early Enlightenment by Reiss (1970) in his editorial Introduction to Kant’s *Political Writings* can with some minor changes be rendered into an account of postmodernism. In terms of theoretical development, postmodernism and modernism can enrich each other. The former can build on the achievements of the latter while incorporating elements which are alien to the latter. On the other hand, through its sharp criticisms of and debate with postmodernism, modernism has to take stock of its failures, and make some changes. It is almost like talking about two competing technologies which are currently much in use and whose capabilities are enhanced by their confrontation.

### **A Few Insights of Postmodernism for Studying the Internet**

The real difficulty in giving a standard description of postmodernism is the lack of agreement among both its supporters and opponents as to what constitutes postmodernity and postmodernism. The literature on postmodernism can easily fill a bookshelf and it is still growing. There is a wide spectrum of responses, expressing not a superficial diversity but a radical fragmentation in conceptions of the essence and meaning of postmodernism. It reflects the formative stage it is in. In spite of the diversity of opinions concerning postmodernism, there are several textbooks which manage to give a fair account of the debate. See Best and Kellner (1991), Rosenau (1992) and Hollinger (1994). Relevant to our discussion are the following elements of postmodernism surveyed in these books:

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<sup>1</sup> In this sense modernism has not been made obsolete, and to the extent we do not go against the ethos of the Enlightenment, modernism is still on humanity’s agenda.

<sup>2</sup> It is a kind of modernist ideology to view man being the master of nature. For a long time it has the pre-modernist thinking that we are subordinate to nature. With some crucial failures of the modernist project, it dawns on people that man is part of nature and that our future depends upon a fuller recognition of both nature’s and humanity’s capabilities and limitations. In the opinion of historian of technology Kranzberg (1985), this is also an awareness of the Information Age.

- power is diffuse; it does not flow from a single point to all the peripheries;
- there is no grand theory to make sense of reality, instead the world is pluralistic;
- the world is fragmented and chaotic. There is no underlying structure, only superficial surface; there is no objective account only multiple realities;
- the ambivalent character of information technology.

Below we would use these elements to look at the Internet from a postmodernist perspective. Unavoidably, these elements do overlap each other a bit here and there, and this is reflected in the discussion below.

## **A POSTMODERNIST PERSPECTIVE ON THE INTERNET**

The modernist view of building an information super-highway is reflected in the initiatives of the big boys like AT&T and other cable and telephone companies. Such commercial undertakings have their conceptual underpinning in strategic business planning, strategic IT infrastructure planning and the likes for national information super-highway. While they are busily laying cables and high-speed network, what surfs through them is the so-called accidental but real information super-highway known as the Internet. The case of the Internet can be dated back to the initiative in 1968 by the US Department of Defence which sponsored Arpanet (Advanced Research Projects Agency). The idea was to provide a functioning system of communication even after a nuclear attack. It has to be completely decentralized so that each data packet can move on towards its destination, making use of whatever communication nodes that are still available. This basic design has turned out to be the basic model of the Internet. The Arpanet was a creation involving universities, companies and the US government, and luckily with the benevolent oversight of the US Congress. It was started to link university computers and researchers to assist them in coordinating basic research on computers and communication networks, and to use these facilities for basic research. It was later widened to include national defence purposes. The success of the Arpanet spurred the births of other similar nets like Usenet and Bitnet. These public and commercial networks were linked up in the mid-1980s and its growth accelerated - to become today's Internet. It may thus be seen as the network of networks, consisting of a growing number of individual networks run by an array of organizations - government, commercial, academic, non-profit, etc - providing facilities for e-mail, bulletin boards, database libraries. The growth of the Net is the result of a happy convergence of three developments - the popularity of personal computer and the use of computer networks in office, the sharp drop in telecommunication costs, and the advent of the World Wide Web. And with the appearance of multi-media technology of late, it serves as a cheap technological platform for individuals and small organizations to run radio stations.

The limits for the uses of the Internet is not yet in sight; witness the growing list of new uses with the help of innovative software, which are being frequently announced in trade magazines. While the personal computers have changed the use of computers from being a machine for number crunching to text processing spread sheet applications, information storage and games, the Internet has opened a new way of transmitting information and access to information hitherto unheard of. Given the amount of

information surging through it, it is more than a Herculean task for any censoring authority to control its content. Moreover, the Internet functions as a backbone infrastructure for new avenues of doing business like electronic commerce, the profits of which many governments like to partake. There is some truth to claim that the Internet is a more significant technological event than the personal computer, though the former cannot occur without the latter.

### **the diffuse nature of power**

While the Internet serves as an interesting example of unintended consequences of social action, it also supports the postmodernist position that power does not flow from a single power centre to all the peripheral points; rather it flows from the peripheries in capillary forms. This diffuse view of power is articulated by Foucault who is very suspicious of the big struggle in the big arena over the big issue that will change everything. Foucault (1979, 1980) emphasizes the local nature of the exercise of power and the way in which such local features may form a wider chain or system of power. One could well be forgiven for thinking that Foucault could well have been written with the Internet in mind. "When everything is connected to everything in a distributed network, everything happens at once. When everything happens at once, wide and fast moving problems simply route around any central authority. Therefore overall governance must arise from the most humble interdependent acts done locally in parallel, and not from a central command (Kelly 1994)."

For Foucault, the social is a network of alliances that cannot be reduced to a hierarchical structure; the social is an unstable system in perpetual disequilibrium, one which he formulates in terms of a diagram or network rather than a closed system (Deleuze 1986). In other words, there are opportunities within organization for its members. Implication: if we are to shape reality we are much more likely to succeed through specific, small-scale and local interventions. This may explain the activities of action groups such as Green Peace (remember its campaign against Shell). This gives hope to those who wish to be engaged in a project of responsibility to a community of others. This point is exemplified by the role of the Internet Society which is a self-regulating body consisting of volunteers. Together they set standards and provide replies on important questions concerning the Internet. Though the Society is not officially endowed with power and though it does not manage the Internet, it is very influential with the Net users.

As a technology, the Internet has opened new pastures of opportunity for those who are not in the seats of established power and wealth. Anderson (1996) observes that "software is a booming industry controlled by giants. But the Internet is changing the rules to favour the small and nimble." Moreover, as mentioned earlier, the Internet offers us the means to operate a radio station. This effectively lowers the financial and technical barrier for social activists with a personal computer with multi-media accessories to reach out to a bigger public. The cyberspace of the Internet is cosmopolitan in scale and in a very real sense it transcends the direct regulative control of any particular state. It is not only a medium for international organizations like Green Peace; it is also a medium within which



the diaspora of exiles and political activists can find a community and a voice. A rather vivid illustration of how the Internet can be used as channel to voice protest is provided by the Free Burma Coalition (see box below). In fact, since the 1990s, a number of non-governmental-organizations have begun to make effective use of IT networks in developing countries for voicing their concerns on issues of human rights, the environment, etc. The Association for Progressive Communication was founded to coordinate global networks working for protection and preservation of the environmental; currently it has member networks in 16 countries and provides access to over 20,000 activists and organizations in 133 countries (Madon 1997). It is partly because of this possibility of reaching out to a world public by anyone with access to the Internet that is causing concerns to those authoritarian governments.

**When spiders unite, they can tie down a lion.**

The line that you just read is the motto used by the Free Burma Coalition to adorn their fax messages. The group is a movement dedicated to the downfall of the military junta. It has effectively exploited the potential of the World Wide Web and the Internet for its campaign, and its aphorism of the strength of the spider web is beautifully appropriate. It offers the movement a cheap and immediate way of communication, and partly as a result of that a sense of solidarity.

The movement has an electronic news service named BurmaNet, providing up-to-date news to its 700 subscribers. Campaign information is also easily accessible at its web site. Partly with the help of the Internet, it has successfully persuaded several transnational corporations to stop doing business in Burma.

Source: The Economist, 10 August 1996

Though recognising the fact that postmodernism is deconstructionist, and with the Internet, there are new avenues of opportunity for those not in power or wealth to voice protest, we must not lose sight of the fact that real powers are still strongly entrenched. This view is necessary to balance the tendency towards a rather euphoric view about the diffuseness of power, and the possibility of the micro-politics of power with the advent of the Internet. This is illustrated by the reliance of the Internet on the telecommunication infrastructure still in the control of giant telecommunication concerns. Another is the power of governments to legislate laws to deny access to certain sites. When this power is used against pornography, against materials advocating terrorist violence or inciting racial and religious hatred, it has the potential to enjoy public support. In part, this is due to the failure of the Internet Society to keep out such offensive materials.

**there is no grand theory to make sense of reality**

A sociologist who uses the “no grand theory” approach to look at the Internet is Turkle (1995). She claims that in this information age “no unitary truth resides anywhere. There

is only local knowledge, contingent and provisional . . . The surface is what matters, to be explored by navigation . . . Postmodernism celebrates this time, this place; and it celebrates adaptability, contingency, diversity, flexibility, sophistication, and relationships - with the self and with the community.” In her view, computers and the Internet are postmodern because they foster the precedence of surface over depth, of simulation over the real, of play over seriousness. The postmodern world is equivocal, permeated with the diversity of interpretations and conflicting interests, and populated by people with multiple shifting identities. The modernist concern for truth and accuracies seems fruitless and futile, and is not of much practical value. Postmodernism rejects the possibility of any correspondence between representations and objects. This point is vividly explained by Lash (1990). He says that for naive realism, reality and its representation is not problematic; for modernism, forms of representation become a problem; for postmodernism reality becomes a problem. If reality cannot be reliably represented then reality means different things to different people. When you surf on the Internet, you could find yourself in a situation where things on the Net become more real to you than the community you are living in. For some people in a figurative sense, they can get married to the Net - they can surf more than ten hours a day on the Net. They are living in a hyperreal world. Reality is thus ambiguous, presenting frustrating to those who are used to certainty, while giving bliss to those who thrive in poetic interpretation. Social reality is metaphorically a text, open to multiple interpretations of the readers, none of which is privileged. In other words, nothing is true in itself, or of itself; truth is only an artifact of negotiation (Mason 1996).

An illustration of this notion of negotiated truth is provided by a discussion of the use of hypertext by the Net users (Kelly 1994). Unlike printed text, (hyper)text on the Net supplies a new role for readers - every reader codetermines the meaning of a text. This relationship may be considered the fundamental idea of postmodern literary criticism. For the postmodernists there is no canon. To them, hypertext allows the reader to engage the author for control of the writing space. The truth of a work changes with each reading, no one of which is exhaustive or more valid than another. Meaning is multiple, a swarm of interpretations. An original text can be commented upon, new texts added, new links made between texts and comments, etc, etc. The hypertext system allows the Net users to create a flat textual landscape where the boundary between text and comments become irrelevant. In order to decipher a text it must be viewed as a network of idea-threads, some threads of which are owned by the author, some belonging to the reader and her historical context and others belonging to the greater context of the author's time. “The reader calls forth his or her own text out of the network, and each such text belongs to one reader and one particular act of reading (Bolter 1991)“.

### **the world is fragmented and chaotic**

The principal features of the information activities conducted on the Net are an ubiquitous eclecticism with a bewildering array of participants. The Net users are proud to boast that it is the largest functioning anarchy in the world (Kelly 1994).

On the optimistic side, the chaos is itself a potential means of enlightenment. In this

chaotic order we can still sustain the ideal of emancipation. We create our own realities in the plural world we invent. Humanity today can become aware that perfect freedom does not lie in having a perfect knowledge of the necessary structure of reality and confirming to it. The increase in possible information in the myriad form of reality makes it increasingly difficult to conceive of a single reality. Reality is rather the result of the intersection and mixture of multiple images, interpretations and reconstructions circulated by the media in competition with one another, and without central co-ordination. There is a danger however. Information in real time about almost everything in the world may be seen by some as a kind of concrete realisation of Hegelian Absolute Spirit - the perfect self-consciousness of the whole of humanity, the co-incidence between what happens, history and human knowledge (Vattimo 1992). The pessimism is that this is realised in a perverse and caricatural forms, thanks to the manipulation of desires, a point addressed by Baudrillard later on.

To the wider public the Internet means the arrival of e-mail, on-line discussion groups and with it the prospects of an on-line world. In a way we are witnessing the formation of the much mentioned global village. It is a case observed by Gergen (1991) where IT creates same space for the emergence of ever-shifting, ever-expanding and incident network of relationship. Some may remark that the Internet has transformed the physical citizens of a modern society into the disembodied *netizens* of a postmodern cyber-community (Floridi 1996). This trend may appear very romantic to IT visionaries. But it can also be very disturbing. Some others even go so far as to suggest the rise of virtual conviviality and the possibility of it replacing the physical encounters between actors in public spaces which are abandoned to the homeless. The issues arising from social virtual reality and simulation are examined by Baudrillard. Building on and going beyond the works of Kafka, Orwell and McLuhan, Baudrillard (1983a, 1983b) argues that if the social world ever existed as object of representation, study or collective action, it no longer does, or else it has been transformed into an object for manipulation. It is an age in which the distinction between reality and illusion has disappeared. The real is itself a simulacrum. The medium is more than the message as claimed by McLuhan - the hyperreal has become real.

The social world does not possess the sort of reality attributed to it by the modernists. As a result the masses have dropped out, to become the shadow of the silent majority. In a mood full of ironic cynicism, Baudrillard (1983a) suggests that the masses, like the proles in Orwell's 1984, are free. A more reflective mood is expressed by Talbot (1995) who explores the roots of some of the more salient metaphors that pop up repeatedly in the literature on IT and the Internet, such as global village, on-line community, etc. He asks why it is that Net surfers have such a special affinity for the word "community", and why they are relying on network technology to rekindle it. Is it the sense of a real community that is slowly being lost? And hence the strong desire for it? "The more we lack something, the more we may be fascinated by fragmentary glimpse of it," he suggests. The problem is that we are looking for the substance of community in the technology itself rather than striving to recover something that is dear to us but which is receding.

Another down side is related to the unrestrained use of the Internet. As a depository of all kinds information, it can be used to transmit all kinds of information and materials. Racist , fascist and sexist materials can be posted on web sites without much concern to its effects on the public. It is like having a library where the gatekeeper role of the librarian has vanished. Anyone can transport piles of magazines and books and dump there for the consumption of anyone who cares to visit the place. When the materials contain elements of scandal involving public personalities, then serious journalism can be severely tested. Operating in a free market economy, catering to the public whose stand on good journalism is dubious, especially when profit motive counts enormously, then serious journalism can be compromised by the intervention of the Internet as an alternative mass medium. This is illustrated by the recent scandal surrounding President Clinton. (Please see box below).

#### **Anything goes in the Cyberspace**

Given the existing culture in the USA, no sex scandal gets by these days without the cyberspace not being used. In fact, the Internet can be employed as a vehicle to initiate frenzied public attention. When senior editors at Newsweek killed an article detailing the alleged affaire President Clinton had with a former White House intern, a gossip writer reported it on his web site. Since then the news has spread like an oil spill. For all the disdain displayed towards sleazy tabloid reporting, the public turns out to have unlimited appetite for it. Even serious journalism has somehow forgotten its dignity and duty. No one seems willing to wait for the facts to be out, to give the episode its due (but not such extremely excessive) coverage. Commenting on the behaviour of the press, Tom Patterson, a professor of journalism at Syracuse University, says, “ I think they’ ve lost their sense of proportion here. There’ s been a rush to judgement.” A Republic pollster observes, “ I think it’ s more a sign of the times than it is of Clinton. *It’s a sign of the Internet*, it’ s a sign of cable and it’ s a sign of increasing tabloid stuff. (emphasis added)”

Source: International Herald Tribune, 27 January 1998

#### **the ambivalent character of information technology**

While modernism perceives technology as playing positive roles in human civilisation, postmodernism tends to be ambivalent about technology. IT is thus not seen to bring mainly benefits to societies, organizations and individuals. Earlier on this paper mentions the use of the Net by hate groups to propagate racism and fascism. Floridi (1996) observes that the Internet is fostering the growth of knowledge, while at the same time generating unprecedented forms of ignorance. While the Net provides a platform for dissident political groupings to spread their otherwise suppressed views, it also acts as a channel for racist, sexist and fascist groups to peddle their goods. It is enhancing social alienation which is very much a feature of modernism. If social gatherings are organized as a means to counter this alienation, these are in danger of being subverted by some postmodernist tendency. For example, modernist birthday parties gather people around

under one roof to enjoy traditional cakes, blow candles, give presents, sing songs and play games. In contrast, guests at postmodern birthday parties watch and comment on the videos shot and shown during the course of the party (Young 1996). Or the party is celebrated via the Internet, with all the guests logged in via the modem. It is a medium abstraction of the event which provides the substance for the party itself.

In the cultural arena, one is given the opportunity to encounter a dazzlingly wide variety of norms and forms. But at the same time we are being bombarded with commercialized culture. This is the dark side of an age when images, media, information, consumerism, and commodity fetishism have become everything. Witness the huge array of commercial services now available on the Internet or making use of it to promote sales of anything from books to cars. In postmodernity power operates through seduction which operates through consumption; pleasure of consumption has become a form of seduction (Bauman 1992). Such feelings are also echoed by Zoja (1995) who feels strongly that mankind is now in a deeply paradoxical state. Expanding knowledge has created scientific theory, impersonal institutions and enormous material wealth. But it increasingly goes hand in hand with the impoverishment of life in other aspects. Demand for instant gratification invades every sphere; witness the popular use of instant coffee, instant tea, instant soup and instant noodles. Consumerism is an addiction. The notion of addiction suggests that the urge to satisfy one's whatsoever desires is so overwhelming as to be beyond his control. An addict cares about now, often at the cost of the future.<sup>3</sup> Whilst modernity extols the delay of gratification, in the hope that the gratification will still be gratifying when the delay is over, the postmodern would preach delay of payment (Bauman 1995). "If the savings book was the epitome of a modern life, the credit card is the paradigm of the postmodern one (ibid)."

Baudrillard (1990) talks about speeding up the lunacy by the excesses of consumerism and seduction so that the system will destroy itself. In a word, this reflects the challenge and dilemma of our time, partly experienced via the Internet. We are confronted with a central question of existentialism - that of freedom, choice and responsibility.

The above remarks sound rather blunt in tone and they are perhaps expected from socially critical intellectuals. Read the following reflection which expresses concern about the awesome technical innovations of our times. "A higher standard of living may go hand in hand with a deterioration of the environment, production of useless products for a throwaway society, banal forms of mass entertainment, greater dangers on the street and senseless violence. [...] Contacts are hastier and communication often has less depth and feeling. Hand-written letters where care has been taken to express thoughts and feelings are becoming rare. No time is set aside for a good talk and the most important thing about a visit is that it should not last too long. Daily life is characterised not by progress, but by simple continuation." The quote is not from any Luddite document, Paul Feyerabend or Jürgen Habermas. It is a passage from the 1997 Christmas speech of

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<sup>3</sup> Here drug addiction and environmental degradation both share a similarity, a certain trait of hedonism. Enjoy the short-term benefits and thrills now and let future take care of itself.

Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands. This suggests that the ambivalence about the achievements of modernised, materially rich and technologically sophisticated societies strikes a cord with a wide spectrum of people.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Postmodernism as a consciousness has its origin in the post-industry societies of the western world, which is closely intertwined with the extensive use and development of IT. As such it can serve as a way of looking at some of the social and cultural phenomena associated with the Internet. This paper has used a few aspects from postmodernist thinking to understand the Internet's world of paradoxes (virtual community, virtual reality, global village), new avenues of challenging established power, the danger of consumption as addiction, pluralism, etc. As this paper has tried to show, the whole happening is not without its blessings and perils. It bolsters the hope that the underprivileged have found a new tool to organize themselves and articulate their aspirations, while the control of the new technology remains very much, though not totally, in the hands of the big boys. Just like other technologies, the Internet re-shapes the landscape of business competition. But in this transition from the old and familiar modernist consciousness to the new and unknown mode of thinking and culture, there seems to be a sort of nihilism which is partly expressed in hedonism and consumerism. It may be seen as an interregnum – both in the material and ideological sense. All this is manifested symbolically in the Internet and in the activities which it supports as an IT infrastructure.

As a way of concluding the paper, the author has some suggestions for further research. *A sound theory of postmodernism is to be informed by the cultural, social, political and economic life of postmodernity.* Some people call such new society post-industrial society, late capitalism or information society. Its social landscape shows certain features which are quite distinct from the industrial societies we know of. Instead of blue collar industrial workers forming the bulk of the workforce and the traditional industries the growth sector, we have the service industries and the information-related sectors which form the growing economy. Business enterprises have used IT to integrate design, manufacture, procurement, sales, administration and technical services. As a result, it does not make sense to speak of a 'service' economy or a 'manufacturing' economy (Freeman 1987). Instead of mass production, we have flexible and individualised production. Integrated and hierarchical organizations of the Fordist period has lost its role as the model organization. Much of such changes have been brought about by the extensive application of IT (Clegg 1990). As such it stands to reason that in-depth studies of organizational and societal changes with IT as the enabling technology can provide interesting insights for understanding postmodernity and postmodernism. The same remark applied to the Internet too. The Internet is in the process of formation; it is a dynamic, still changing environment. The principal features of information-related activities conducting on the Internet are a ubiquitous eclecticism and a bewildering array of participants. At the same time the very structure of this network space shapes us. "The

transition from modern culture to the postmodern results from the application of technological information and communication developments to personal and corporate activities (Young 1996)." This echoes the view of Kelly(1994) that it is no coincidence that postmodernism arises in tandem as the space of networks is formed.

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